Jun 6th, 10:01 AM - 11:00 AM

Commentary on Macagno and Rapanta, “Coding empathy”

José Ángel Gascón
Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción

Commentary on Macagno and Rapanta's "Coding Empathy"

JOSÉ ÁNGEL GASCÓN
Centro de Investigación en Educación y Desarrollo (CIEDE)
Universidad Católica de la Santísima Concepción (UCSC)
Alonso de Ribera 2850, Concepción
Chile
jgascon@ucsc.cl

1. Some remarks on empathy in argumentation

Empathy is a very rich and complex concept. When one decides to incorporate a new concept into the study of argumentation, it is generally necessary to first define it more or less accurately, before attempting to spell out how it manifests itself in arguments. Unfortunately, this is a very difficult thing to do in the case of empathy. There are just too many different approaches to empathy, too many different definitions in the fields of psychology, ethics, neurology, or philosophy of emotions. A search for a precise definition is liable to lead to the neglect of some crucial aspect of empathy.

Nevertheless, empathy is doubtless important in argumentation as in other disciplines, and Macagno and Rapanta have been brave enough to tackle the study of such a fuzzy and multi-faceted aspect of human communication. Logicians and argumentation theorists, focused on the epistemic dimension of argumentation, have traditionally neglected the role that empathy plays in the resolution of disagreements. A notable exception, which the authors mention, is Michael Gilbert. In his latest manual of argumentation, Gilbert presents argumentative discussions as disagreements among people which can be solved only by making a serious effort to understand each other (2014, p. 104):

> An important ingredient in pursuing agreement is empathy, and by that I mean understanding the position your dispute partner holds: why does she believe what she does, and how does she see your position as opposing hers?

Of course, as Macagno and Rapanta point out in section 3 of their paper, in classical rhetoric one can find several considerations that involve what could be seen as empathy. The *enthymeme*, the rhetorical syllogism, relies on premises that are presumably accepted by the audience. In order to be effective when presenting an *enthymeme*, the orator must know what the audience believes, what they will probably accept and what they will not. This requires a sort of empathic understanding of the other's views.

In pragmatics and dialectics, the concept of "common ground" serves a similar function. In order to convince someone of a claim, arguers must build on other claims to which their interlocutor is already committed—explicitly or implicitly. The existence of a common ground is even necessary for a proper understanding of the claims uttered by a speaker, given that any claim presupposes a certain amount of shared knowledge. The pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation also stresses that arguments must be based on "starting points," that is, commitments shared by the arguers, but since arguers usually do not make explicit all their commitments, arguably some empathy is needed in order to identify them (Eemeren, 2018).

This rhetorical/dialectical sense of empathy surely characterises a trait that good arguers must have. However, it seems to me that there is also something unsatisfactory about such an account of empathy in argumentation. Something important seems to be missing here. Such a characterisation of empathy has a flavour that perhaps it would not be inaccurate to call "strategic." Surely, arguers must make an effort to put themselves in their audience's shoes, but—it seems—merely with the aim of finding the best strategy to convince them. By

exercising this kind of strategic empathy, the arguers' own beliefs, interests, and, in general, worldview, are never called into question. But genuine empathy, one would think, has at least the potential to do that—and very often it does precisely that.

Let me illustrate this with an example. It is an argument that I personally admire for its rhetorical merits, for the arguer's good sense of *kairos*—its appropriateness, given the circumstances and the beliefs and values of the audience. I was hoping to come up with some terrific idea for a paper into which I could slip this argument, but failing that, here it goes, in a commentary.

The year is 2011 and the country is Colombia. The then president of the country, Juan Manuel Santos, was working on a Victims Act that could redress the grievances suffered by the Colombian people during the long-lasting internal conflict. The Act included the term "armed conflict," and that triggered the criticisms of Álvaro Uribe, former right-wing president, who always denied the existence of a conflict and insisted that it was rather a terrorism issue. In declarations to the press, Santos responded to those criticisms with the following argument:[1]

> If there is no conflict, we cannot bomb the guerrilla leaders. In the domain of Human Rights [Law] it is forbidden, and therefore the former president Uribe and I would end up in La Picota jail.

What I find most remarkable in this argument is that Santos deliberately avoided ideological debates, which he knew would not lead to an agreement. He knew his interlocutor well—his beliefs, values, and interests—and was aware that any appeal to peace, compromise, or political legitimacy of the enemy would be a non-starter. Instead, he resorted to a pragmatic argument: we both need to acknowledge the existence of an armed conflict so that we can bomb them. Here, Santos appealed to what were obvious interests of his predecessor: bombing the enemy and not going to jail. This is, I believe, an excellent exercise of rhetorical empathy—in the Aristotelian sense of knowing your audience well.

But it is not difficult to see that, in this example, empathy is exercised with the sole aim of arguing *effectively*. This is why the rhetorical sense of empathy can be considered as merely strategic. We do not see here a real effort to understand why Uribe opposed the recognition of an armed conflict, the reasons behind his point of view, his beliefs and values. And when one reflects on what empathy involves, not in any technical sense of the term but in its ordinary meaning, there is the feeling that such an effort should be a must.

If I can be allowed a slightly exaggerated analogy—or, well, I will admit it: a wildly exaggerated one—that strategic sense of empathy leaves us with a similar impression to that of the sadistic torturer who knows how to best inflict pain. He can perceive and understand other people's pain all right, but he uses that knowledge to advance his own sadistic aims—which, of course, conflict with those of the victim. After all, according to some accounts, empathy is a necessary condition not only for compassion but also for sadism (Reeder Jr., 2010). So, yes, there can be a strategic sense of empathy according to which empathy involves taking the other's beliefs and feelings into account in order to advance our own goals (persuade or torture), but something is missing in that picture. Such a conception of empathy leaves out the component of *caring* for the other.

It is for this reason that, I believe, Macagno and Rapanta's paper goes in the right direction. They mention the rhetorical treatment of empathy in section 3, but their approach goes beyond that. So let us see what they actually say. It is probably time for me to stop writing my own ramblings and get on with the job commenting on their paper.

---

[1] Source (retrieved May 17th, 2020): https://www.elcolombiano.com/historico/sin_conflicto_armado_uribe_y_yo_nos_vamos_a_la_carcel_santos-CFEC_133515

2. The good stuff

Macagno and Rapanta's paper is an important step towards a proper study of empathy in argumentation. The easy way to do that, I guess, would have been to adopt a virtue approach to argumentation (as I did), to characterise empathy as a virtue in very broad terms, and to conclude that the empathic arguer will know what to do when the appropriate occasion arises to exercise that virtue. Instead, they chose the hard way: to specify how exactly empathy manifests itself in arguments and to develop a code that can capture particular instances of empathic performance.

The code developed in the paper focuses on understanding and responding to the interlocutor in a relevant way. It draws on the notion of "transactivity", from the analysis of educational language. Transactive discussions are not simple consecutive utterances but genuine reactions to what the other has asserted. Thus, for example, in their analysis of moral discussions, Berkowitz and Gibbs (1983) include among the transactive statements the clarifications, the elaborations, and the criticisms. Now, I am not familiar with the literature on that topic, and something puzzled me in Macagno and Rapanta's exposition of the notion of transactivity. After showing how the concept became useful for the detection of the "otherness dimension" and of coherence in dialogues, the authors conclude (p. 9):

> The concept of transactivity has been thus developed in the literature as a form of operationalizing empathy at two different levels, namely the dialogical involvement of the other (addressing what he said), and the textual connectedness with the preceding discourse and the goal of the interaction.

What I found puzzling is that, so far as I can see, none of the authors that worked with the concept of transactivity presented it as "operationalizing empathy." That is, rather, Macagno and Rapanta's interpretation of their work. And that made me realise that there is something more in their paper than a code for displays of empathy: there is the important insight, concealed in the above quotation, that a proper pragmatic performance in communication requires empathic speakers. Let us move on to section 5, where they develop their code, to see why this is so.

There are, according to the code that is proposed in the paper, two dimensions of transactivity: dialogicity and relevance. The dialogicity of a move in a dialogue refers to its transactive potential, and the relevance of a move refers to its actual transactivity. Hence, whether or not a potentially transactive move is actually so depends ultimately on its relevance. For instance, presenting an argument is a highly dialogical move, but whether it is actually transactive depends on whether the argument is relevant or not.

Here, I hope I am not the only one who cannot but think of the pragmatics of communication and Gricean maxims. In fact, Macagno and Rapanta open their paper with a truly Gricean example. What they are describing and coding seems to be the principles of rationality in communication. Compare, for example, with one of the rules that Eemeren and Grootendorst proposed as part of their Communication Principle (2004, p. 77):

> 5. You must not perform any speech acts that are not in an appropriate way connected with previous speech acts (by the same speaker or writer or by the interlocutor) or the communicative situation.

What dawned on me, when I was reading the paper, is that empathy is necessary in order to abide by the principles of rational communication. This is, I believe, an important insight in

Macagno and Rapanta's paper. It is not possible to properly understand the other's statements, to respond to them in a relevant way, and to interpret correctly any conversational implicatures, if one cannot view things from the other's perspective—at least minimally.

Grice (1989) never mentioned empathy in his account of implicatures; but then again, he was not very explicit about how one goes about grasping implicatures. Of course, it is no easy matter. It is not possible to spell out a series of steps that can be followed automatically to end up with a correct interpretation of an implicature. Now we know why: understanding and communicating are activities that cannot be done automatically—they require empathic engagement. Likewise, one can only fulfil the maxims of the Cooperative Principle if one has at least a minimum of empathy—otherwise, one could not know what and how much information is relevant to the interlocutor. What has been called "empathic accuracy" (Ickes, 1993), that is, the ability to accurately infer the content of the other's thoughts and feelings, is a requirement for the ability to fulfil the Cooperative Principle.

3. An unfair challenge

The empathy that is captured by the code designed by Macagno and Rapanta is the minimal level of empathy that involves recognising the other and engaging with her. As we have seen, they take into account two dimensions: addressing the other, and doing so in a way that is relevantly connected to "the other's viewpoint, move, or at least the topic under discussion" (p. 9). Coding these two dimensions of empathy is surely a big step, and it could help us detect a speaker's degree of engagement in the conversation. But, since empathy is such a rich concept—and since it is not me who has to do the hard work of coding it—one could ask for more.

I made some remarks in the first section of this commentary about the complexity and richness of empathy—and they might turn out not to be entirely pointless after all. Let us think about them a little bit. There, I contrasted the rhetorical, strategic sense of empathy with fully-fledged empathy—which is, I believe, the ordinary sense of empathy. Broadly speaking, fully-fledged empathy involves the ability to perceive and understand the other's thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and interests, not merely to *use* them but to *care* for them. How could that be analysed in argumentation? I think we should begin by looking at how arguers perceive and evaluate *reasons*, that is, what reasons they see as counting in favour of what, and how much. Let me explore that idea.

Consider again the case of the torturer—yes, why not, let us dwell on that wild analogy that will probably embarrass me at some point. As I said, the torturer can put himself in his victim's shoes, at least in the sense that he can perceive his pain and his fear. How is this not empathic? Well, it is in a minimal sense, but it is not if empathy also involves being appropriately concerned about them. The sadistic torturer does take his victim's pain and fear as reasons, but unfortunately he takes them to be reasons for keeping torturing his victim. Using Anscombre and Ducrot's (1983) term, we could say that there is here a problem with the *orientation* of the reasons. For the victim, the pain and fear provide reasons *not to* torture, whereas for the torturer they are reasons *to* torture.

Apart from the orientation of reasons, there could also be a problem with the *weight* that an arguer gives to certain reasons. Consider the case of sexual harassment. In the 1970s, feminist activists coined the term to refer to unsolicited sexual advances and intimidation at the workplace. For centuries, this had been a very real—even certain—threat for women, who felt humiliated and intimidated. However, men did not take it seriously. Many men, including perpetrators, claimed that women were "taking it too seriously, and it was all a joke" (Nemy, 1975). Hence, what was happening here is that women were arguing that sexual harassment was a reason for them to feel threatened, and for men to stop; men, on the other hand, did not

appreciate the weight of that reason. This situation is not one in which the listener regards the reasons as having an opposite orientation to the one the arguer ascribes to them—as in the case of the torturer—but could be interpreted as one in which the listener does not appreciate how much weight the reasons have for the arguer.

Intuitively, both examples are clear cases of lack of empathy. In order to somehow capture, from an argumentative perspective, what is going on in those examples, I am suggesting that they could be seen as cases in which an arguer is *blind* to the other arguer's perspective on what counts as a reason for what. The unempathetic arguer could thus make two mistakes: (1) failing to understand and care for the *orientation* that certain reasons have for the other arguer, or (2) failing to understand and care for the *weight* that those reasons have for her.

I think this would be a valuable incorporation to Macagno and Rapanta's code for empathy. But I know it is a great challenge—perhaps an unfairly demanding one. In the first place, it would be necessary to delve into the tricky issue of evaluation of arguments, even though the enterprise is supposed to be merely descriptive. The analyst, of course, would not need to evaluate arguments herself, but she would have to detect and classify the way arguers evaluate arguments—what reasons count in favour of what and how much weight they have, according to the arguers. In the second place—and I confess I see this as an insurmountable problem for my proposal—it would not be enough simply to check whether arguers evaluate reasons the same way. An empathic arguer is not someone who simply adopts whatever reasons the other has. That is a parrot, not an arguer. Taken to the extreme, my proposal would make empathy incompatible with argumentation—since all empathic arguers would all end up thinking the same.

How, then, can this aspect of empathy be incorporated into a code for measuring empathy in argumentation? I guess the only way would be to analyse somehow the content of arguments, and that makes the whole task a lot more difficult. In any case, I leave the idea there, for what it is worth. In a commentary one is supposed to provide some constructive proposal, and proposing is free.

References

Anscombre, J. C., & Ducrot, O. (1983). *L'argumentation dans la langue*. Bruxelles: Pierre Mardaga.

Berkowitz, M. W., & Gibbs, J. C. (1983). Measuring the developmental features of moral discussion. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 29*(4), 399–410.

Gilbert, M. A. (2014). *Arguing with people*. Broadview Press.

Grice, P. (1989). Logic and conversation. In *Studies in the way of words* (pp. 22–40). Harvard University Press.

Ickes, W. (1993). Empathic accuracy. *Journal of Personality*, *61*(4), 587–610.

Nemy, E. (1975, August 19). Women begin to speak out against sexual harassment at work. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/1975/08/19/archives/women-begin-to-speak-out-against-sexual-harassment-at-work.html

Reeder Jr., J. P. (2010). What kind of person could be a torturer? *Journal of Religious Ethics*, *38*(1), 67–92.

van Eemeren, F. H. (2018). *Argumentation theory: A pragma-dialectical perspective*. Springer.

van Eemeren, F. H., & Grootendorst, R. (2004). *A systematic theory of argumentation*. Cambridge University Press.